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A TUBE OF MUMMY

BY EDWARD S. VAN ZILE

SHE was not only the most beautiful, but the most patient sitter that my studio had ever known. It was only by a strong effort of will that I could overcome the ever-present temptation to take advantage of her inexhaustible good-nature.

It was not so much that fame as a portrait-painter was to be won or lost by the success or failure of my picture that impelled me to sacrifice her comfort to the exigencies of my work—as the fact that my enthusiasm as an artist had been stirred to fever-heat by the marvelous possibilities she presented to my brush. The painter in me was too much absorbed in the present to think of the future, much less to fear it. To win from her complaisance all that the moment granted to my powers was my one desire. And so, too often I fear, I would paint on and on with cruel, feverish persistence, indifferent to the tired muscles, the exhausted nerves, the lost enthusiasm of my devoted sitter. Then, perhaps, into those dark limpid, fathomless eyes would come a gleam of mute appeal, lines of weariness around the strong, full-blooded mouth, a sigh from lips that had never uttered a protesting word.

"Can you forgive me?" I would cry repentantly, laying aside my brushes and palette and turning from my easel with the reluctance of one awakened from the joys of dreamland to the humdrum of reality. "You're too good to me, Miss Manderson. Why do you never reprove the brutal selfishness of the artist? Believe me, I'm not altogether heartless."

"Your complete absorption in your work is an inspiration to me" she would say, standing erect and smiling down at me from the dais. "But you've not been wholly happy to-day. I've been so sorry for you. Is it my fault? Something has gone wrong."

"Is it your fault, Miss Manderson, that your hair, with its elusive golden-browns, defies the varied resources of my palette? Is it your fault that my skill is unequal to the—no, I'll not say that! it would sound like mock humility. Frankly then, I don't lack self-confidence. I'm wholly satisfied with my work as a whole. The pose, the background, the color-scheme, the eyes—ah, I've been gloriously successful with the eyes! But where the light falls upon your wonderful hair—there comes a tint, a hue so characteristic but so evasive that I almost despair of achieving the great triumph that seems to be just within my grasp. A fine portrait—yes. That you'll have. But unless I can find a pigment that shall enable me to reproduce the strange, almost uncanny beauty of that golden-brown glory above your forehead, the painter in me must put on sackcloth and ashes, though a whole city should ring with the fame of our collaboration."

"Collaboration?" she showed her perfect teeth in a quizzical smile as she put the query.

"Like a quarrel, Miss Manderson, it takes two to make a portrait. More than a few painters have won success largely through the genius of their models. I could illustrate what I mean, if you would glance for a moment at your portrait, and——"

"Avaunt, tempter!" she had cried playfully. "Didn't I take a solemn vow at the outset not to look upon your work until you had put the very last touch to the canvas? Surely, your likeness is not perfect if you've painted no stubbornness into my face."

"Let us call it rather strength of will" I suggested, aiding her with outer wraps. "But bear in mind, Miss Manderson, that if our portrait is not the marvelous triumph of which I have dreamed, it will not be either your fault or mine. The failure must be laid to my thrifty palette, which, at a great crisis, has refused to my poverty the gift of a bit of gold."

Her maid joined her in the outer room and at the doorway she turned and glanced back at me.

"Tomorrow, at the same hour, isn't it?"

A stray lock from beneath her hat caught the glow of an errant sunbeam and, heavy-hearted, I returned to my studio, my mind vainly sounding the whole gamut of pigments to find the note for lack of which my symphony in brown and gold and flesh-tints must forever fail of perfect harmony.

For a long time I stood gazing at the picture on my easel. It was a curious intermingling of delight and despair that my work aroused. Joy for what I had accomplished was mine, marred by the conviction that a seemingly slight but really insuperable obstacle stood between me and my ultimate goal. It would add much to the reader's interest in my story if I could convey to his mind a vivid impression of my portrait of Miss Manderson, as it met my eyes at that moment. Striving to avoid the use of technical terms, let me endeavor to describe the picture that was destined, as I believed, to make or mar my career.

I had made no outline drawing of my sitter. Not once at the outset had charcoal touched my canvas, but out of a seeming chaos of pigments her face had appeared against a background that was of itself a test and triumph of my skill. Low in tone but subtly full of color, the picture had developed beneath my brush with a fidelity both to truth and artistic values that had given an intoxicating flavor to my joy of creation. Her deep dark mysterious eyes, a strange contrast in color to the tawny golden glow of her hair, had challenged the uttermost resources of my technique, the while they had stirred in me anew the hope that for one crucial moment, at the least, my hand might be guided by that awesome power that men call genius. Surely, the prayer of my soul had been granted, for her very self gazed at me from the canvas through eyes in whose dark depths gleamed a spark of that light that never was on sea or land.

The lines of an old poem echoed through my distraught mind. "Gods, could I but paint a dying groan!" I shuddered at the self-revelation that the quotation thrust upon me. The heroic realism of Parrhasios, who put a slave to the torture that he might depict the death-agony of a human countenance, was brutal; but was it not, in a way, sublime? There was but one thing in all the universe that I

craved—a small tube of paint that should vouchsafe to me a bit of brownish-golden splendor for the high-light of my portrait. Were it in my power to do a slave to death to obtain this boon, would I find in my soul that glorious indifference to everything not art that had made Parrhasios immortal?

"Bah" I muttered to myself, turning my back to my easel and donning my hat and coat. "This is the twentieth century and I live in New York. I'll go down to the Salmagundi to luncheon and find a complete restoration to sanity in art gossip and weak claret."

But, after all, common-sense is not to be won for the wooing. Nor is a crowd of young and enthusiastic artists, even though they be of New York and the twentieth century, a source from which a reasonable estimate of the comparative value to the universe of a work of art is to be obtained. Nevertheless it was my own fault, to a large extent, that my luncheon hour that day did not restore me to a normal attitude of mind.

"Parrhasios the Greek killed an Egyptian slave to catch the pale gray tint of a dying groan" I remarked over my soup, glancing down the table at a row of strikingly picturesque faces, bearded, smooth-shaven, strong, weak, light, dark, but all very much alive. "Is there a man here who would go so far as to assassinate a cat to obtain the chrome yellow of its passing yowl?"

"The dying breath of a cat would be Maltese brown" remarked Percy van Zant gently.

"And of an Egyptian slave Nile green" added the gray-bearded Brenton, glancing at me with big, sorrowful eyes that seemed to have grown sad and weary in their life-long quest of beauty.

"You've raised a question of technique, my friends" I protested "while in reality I put a broad query to the art spirit of the age. Let me limit the scope of my inquiry somewhat. Let us suppose that one of us saw immortality awaiting him just beyond a few strokes of his brush. But to make those few strokes and win undying fame he must obtain a certain tube of paint. There is but one of the kind in the country, and that one your chum carries close to his heart, so precious is the stuff. Your only chance for the success you crave lies in murdering your best friend at night and stealing the tube. Under such conditions, what is your duty toward your art?"

"It seems to be in striking antagonism to your duty toward your neighbor" drawled Hutchinson the sculptor. "But under the circumstances I feel that any painter worthy of the name—and thank Heaven I don't belong to the gild—would be wholly justified in killing and robbing his sleeping chum."

"Tubee or not tubee? that is the question," murmured van Zant flippantly. "On the whole I agree with Hutchinson. The art that conceals art should be punished with death."

Upstairs an hour later good old Brenton drew me aside and, gazing at my flushed face with his big, melancholy eyes:

"You confined your remarks, my boy, to generalities; but the fact is, you're in trouble. An artist never voluntarily chooses murder as a topic of conversation unless he is facing a crisis that

threatens to overthrow his mental poise. Can I help you in any way?"

Ten minutes later Brenton and I were standing before my easel, silent for a while, as two artists are wont to be when the one is a creator and the other for the time being a critic.

"You have found yourself, my boy" remarked Brenton presently. "This is an achievement—I'll go so far as to say a great achievement. But——"

"Yes, I know" I hastened to interpose. "But what shall I do? The color-scheme, simple as it is, has outrun my palette. I want a golden-brown for that high-light, the like of which I've never seen. But it must exist—somewhere on earth it must exist."

"I've a tube of it in my studio. Come with me" said my gray-bearded friend-in-need curtly, and without further words we hurried from my apartment and down Fifth Avenue at a clipping pace.

Despite the recent efforts of science to give a materialistic explanation to the phenomena of dreams, the latter still remain a more or less awe-inspiring mystery to the average layman. I have never made a close study of the subject, but I have been struck at times, when my friends were discussing the various manifestations of the artistic spirit, with the fact that certain generalities that apply to paintings adapt themselves as well to the visions of dreamland. "Sleep hath its own world"—and therein do we not find that no school of art has been left unrepresented? The grotesque, the romantic, the realistic, the impressionistic—can we not classify our dreams, like our pictures, under these various heads? May we not even go further and assert that in the art galleries of the world we find the dreams of the race made permanent in paint?

I dreamed a dream that night so vivid, so sharp in outline and rich in color that even now, if I close my eyes, I can recall every detail of the scene upon which I gazed. It was midnight in ancient Thebes and I seemed to stand within the shadow of a mighty column, peering into a moonlighted court, deserted at the moment but grimly suggestive of man and his passions, for, gleaming beneath the silvery splendor, there lay upon the tiled flooring, almost within reach of my hand, a long dagger, its blade triangular, its handle a twisted viper, the emblem of royalty. From out the heavy shadows across the court stalked a tall, athletic youth, his clear-cut, pallid face smooth and beardless, his black hair bound with a narrow band intertwined with the golden coils of the symbolic asp. He wore nothing but a tunic, embroidered at the sleeves and neck and hugged at the waist by a black leather belt.

On the instant a woman glided toward him, seemingly from my very side, and confronted him in the center of the moonlit court. Youth, grace, vigor were in her movements; and, as she stood there facing this son of suns, from beneath her elaborate headdress stole a lock of tawny golden hair that shone like burnished metal in the white light.

Then of a sudden the woman turned and I saw her face, the face of one unknown to me—until her eyes, for a fleeting instant, met mine and I seemed to gaze into great, dark, soulful depths, lighted at that moment by the lurid spark of passion. Bending, she seized the glittering dagger that lay almost

at my feet, and, drawing herself erect, turned and plunged the weapon to the very hilt through the heart of her royal lover, upon whose pale face there rested a taunting, mocking smile.

My dream had become a nightmare, and I awoke with a start, a chill at my heart, a cold perspiration on my brow, a horror of the unknown gripping my soul, not lost until from my staring eyes the imprint of ancient Thebes had faded and I could see that a New York dawn was stealing into my room through an open window.

* * * * *

Miss Manderson glanced down at me with questioning eyes from the dais as I removed the cloth from my canvas and placed my easel in its accustomed position.

"You're in an exalted mood this morning" she said abruptly. "I'm so glad. Your despondency yesterday cast a blight upon my spirit. I'm sorry you referred to our collaboration. The responsibility has affected my nerves. I slept wretchedly last night."

"That is hard to believe" I remarked, scanning her face attentively. "From my point of view you're in glorious form this morning. And that's well, for this is to be a great day for our picture. I've found the golden key that's to unlock for us the door to the Palace of Fame."

Selecting a tube of paint from my box, I stepped toward her.

"See, Miss Manderson!" I cried, holding the tube aloft. "For three thousand years the contents of this little tin phial have been awaiting the chance to do us a favor. Think of it! A Pharaoh may have lived and died to this great end alone, that after countless ages he might throw a dash of golden light upon your portrait, might help a canvas to immortalize the marvelous tint of your sunny hair!"

"What do you mean?" queried my sitter rather sharply, gazing at the little tube with suspicious eyes.

"Merely this" I explained. "This phial—and thrice blessed am I to possess it—is mummy, Egyptian mummy, ground into paste with poppy oil and ready to give to my palette the one pigment in all the world that I lacked."

"Do you mean" faltered Miss Manderson, clasping her white slender hands together nervously "do you mean that the paint in that tube was actually made from a dead Egyptian?"

"That's the crude, rather repellent fact," I admitted, beginning to regret my ill-advised loquacity. Then, after the manner of a man, I went on feverishly, making a bad matter worse. "You see, a mummy several thousands of years old makes a stunning golden-brown paint, thanks to the bitumen that was used in the embalming process."

"Don't" cried Miss Manderson, raising a hand protestingly. "It's the creepiest, most uncanny thing I ever heard of! Why did you tell me about it? The mere thought of your using that paint on my portrait gives me a chill. I'm not superstitious—but I don't like the idea. Is there no other way? Haven't you something that would do as well?"

"But think of it, Miss Manderson" I began argumentatively, unscrewing the top from the tube of mummy and squeezing a bit of the paint on to

my palette. "Doesn't the great lapse of time since our Pharaoh—if such he was—ruled in Thebes soften somewhat the gruesome aspects of the case? And surely it's no ignoble end to which he was come to-day. To serve the cause of truth and beauty at the last—could the most exacting mummy ask for a nobler fate after ages of what one of our public men called 'innocuous desuetude'?"

"Your logic of course is unanswerable" remarked my sitter somewhat coldly, but there was a touch of temper in her voice and I glanced up from my palette and met her gaze. On the instant my dream came back to me, for in the depths of those clear dark fathomless eyes lurked a suggestion of that lurid gleam that had meant death to the son of Pharaoh in my vision of the night. Then, to my relief, Miss Manderson smiled and said:

"Forgive me, won't you? I fear I've been acting like a supersensitive girl with nerves—a type I detest. Use your mummy as you please. I'm shocked to think how near I came to being intensely and unreasonably selfish. Get to work, if you are ready, and absolve me from my vow! What are a thousand dead Egyptians to the completion of my portrait and the satisfaction of my almost ungovernable curiosity? I may see the picture to-day, may I not? You'll finish it this morning?"

"Unless my Pharaoh plays me false, within the hour you shall pass judgment upon my chef-d'œuvre" I answered, confronting my portrait, palette and brushes in hand, my pulses throbbing with the joy of a runner who sees the tape and victory just ahead of him.

But I discovered presently that there had come to me a strange reluctance to put the final touches to my picture. In the clear light of morning the many striking merits of the portrait and its one marked defect were sharply emphasized. It lay within my power to harmonize my color-scheme by a few strokes of the brush, but for a time I dawdled with the background, experimented idly and to no effect with the shadows of the neck, the flesh tints of the face, the fine curve of the eyebrows, the warm tints of the strong but symmetrical mouth. The eyes I dared not touch again. In their dark depths I could read the pleasing assurance that behind my mastery of technique lay the controlling force of genius, and as I glanced at my sitter and met her smiling gaze my heart came into my throat. My sensation of triumphant elation was well-nigh suffocating, but it lasted but a moment. Above her forehead the light brought into sharp relief the glowing golden brown of her glorious hair, and as I turned again to scan my canvas I realized anew that without recourse to my mummy I should fail to achieve my masterpiece.

"More trouble?" queried Miss Manderson, a note of apprehension in her voice. "Your mood has changed again. Forgive me if it's my fault. Really, I meant it when I said that you have my full and free permission to use your new paint."

"Thank you" I replied perfunctorily, my eyes fixed upon my palette. "It may be new paint, but it's a very old mummy. It comes from Thebes—so my friend Brenton tells me. It's a curious fact that the mummies of Thebes make a more costly pigment than those of Memphis. There is a mystery about it. I wonder——"

I had been screwing up my courage by dabbling in my mummy paint with the end of the brush I had chosen for the finishing touches to my picture, and now I stood motionless for a moment, gazing at my canvas and wondering vaguely why my hand, always so sure and steady at a crisis in my work, should tremble now. Pulling myself together with an effort, I touched the brush to the canvas just where the high light fell above the forehead upon the woman's hair.

"What—what has happened to you? Are you faint?"

From a great distance I heard Miss Manderson's voice, like one calling from the shore to a swimmer in great peril. I knew that I had stepped back from my easel and stood gazing at my canvas with eyes big with horror and amazement. I was transfixed by what I saw—the smooth, clear-cut, pallid face of a man about whose black hair was bound a narrow band intertwined with the gleaming coils of an asp. In his dark passionate eyes and round his thin proud lips played a mocking smile, a smile that suggested vengeance satisfied; cold, diabolical, terrifying.

Impulsively I pulled the curtain across the canvas, shutting out from sight the abhorrent evil thing that had destroyed my handiwork at the very moment of achievement.

"It's nothing, Miss Manderson" I faltered, approaching the dais unsteadily. "A sudden dizziness, that's all. The light—I—if—if you don't mind, we'll do no more work to-day."

She had stepped down from her chair and stood searching my face with sympathetic, questioning eyes.

"I'm to blame" she murmured, self-reproachfully. "Day after day I've kept you at your task in my impatient egotism, and now——"

Her words, unjust though they were to her, were sweet to me—too sweet—and with a mighty effort of the will I shut my ears to them.

"You'll go now, won't you?" I suggested, almost rudely. "If I need you again—and the chances are I sha'n't—I'll send for you."

"And my portrait?" she asked after a pause, during which I had kept my eyes stubbornly away from hers. "Am I to see it before I go?"

"Not if you would keep your vow, Miss Manderson.

My—my slight touch of vertigo leaves the picture still unfinished."

After her departure I closed the door to the painting-room, and lighting a cigar stretched myself at full length upon a Turkish divan in the ante-chamber. To me thus striving to calm my perturbed nerves came Brenton, breaking in upon my privacy with scant ceremony.

"Did it do the trick?" he asked abruptly, a suggestion of surprise in his sad eyes as he noted my indolence and the closed door of my studio. "Has Pharaoh saved your bacon, old man?"

"Sit down and smoke" I said gruffly. Then from the pocket of my jacket I took his tube of mummy and thrust it toward him.

"Take it" I said. "I'm through with it."

"You seem grateful" muttered Brenton satirically, as he scanned my averted face searchingly.

"Don't misunderstand me, my dear fellow" I remarked apologetically. "My gratitude to you is deep and lasting. But I sha'n't use your mummy on my portrait. I've touched the picture for the last time."

"You've left it as it was yesterday?" he queried, the artist in him shocked at my attitude toward the matter.

I paused a moment before answering his question.

"Yes" I replied, after a time. "It's the same as yesterday, and I'll never change it. What I ought to do with it is to turn it over to the police."

"H'm" mused Brenton, stroking his gray beard. "I don't understand you, old man. The police? What has happened to you? Yesterday, if I recall your words, you might have succumbed to the temptation to commit murder—in the name of Art. To-day, well, to-day you talk like a Philistine. I have it. You're in love!"

"Bah" I exclaimed testily. "Why do you prattle nonsense—at your age, Brenton? Matrimony—how many times have I heard you say it?—is not for the painter."

"No, matrimony is not for the painter" repeated my friend with strong emphasis. "But—my tube of mummy is."

I sat erect upon the divan and faced my tormentor into whose melancholy eyes had come the gleam of a tantalizing smile that gave the final filip to my waning self-control.

"Look here, Brenton" I cried hotly, "you may or may not comprehend me, but what I say is—damn your tube of mummy!"

Edward S. van Zile

REFLECTIONS OF A MURAL PAINTER

BY W. B. VAN INGEN

AS the shadows of life were lengthening across his pathway, an artist signed a canvas in these words: "Painted with his own hands at the age of seventy. By John La Farge."

It was a picture made for the walls of the Supreme Court in the beautiful State capitol at St. Paul, of Moses receiving the Tables of the Law on Mount Sinai. In the distance the aged leader of the tribes of Israel kneels with a humility that bespeaks the consciousness of being unworthy of receiving the

miraculous gift of God. The scene is on a mountain top; great clouds of smoke and fire suggest a convulsion of nature; but there is in the immediate surrounding of Moses a calm that seems to tell of the repose of Law and Justice. There are two other figures; they are in the foreground. One shrinks from the majesty of the Divine Revelation, the other indicates that there are some approaching who need to be warned that this is sacred ground.

If one may judge from the evidence the "Mass of